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## The First American Naval Combat in Vietnam January 11

Task Force 38 sailed from the Philippines into the South China Sea, headed for Cam Ranh Bay. Its mission was to sink any enemy shipping encountered in the area, particularly the enemy fleet.

The date was January 11, 1945.

Although France had colonized (what is today) Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Japanese had taken over from the French in 1940. The Japanese maintained significant military units in country during the world war. The U.S. Army Air Force had regularly bombed Japanese targets in northern Vietnam from based in China, but, as the Allies had advanced against Japanese forces in Southeast Asia, it was the Navy's turn.

In January 1945, U.S. forces were landing at Lingayen Gulf in the Philippines, one phase of the campaign to retake the islands from the Japanese. Senior American officers believed part of the Japanese fleet was in Vietnamese waters (although they used the then current term, "French Indochina"), so U.S. vessels were dispatched to prevent the enemy from intervening against the troop landings. This was designated Operation GRATITUDE.

The U.S. ships had a tactical SIGINT unit on board to provide early warning of any Japanese air action against the task force. The unit searched all known frequencies for Indochina.

No warning was forthcoming --- or necessary --- TF 38 achieved complete surprise. An official report noted that U.S. aircraft "splashed three planes without radio reaction noted." The tactical SIGINT unit intercepted Japanese communications only well after the first air combat occurred.

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*Task Force 38 during a later operation in 1945*

The task force discovered that the Japanese fleet was not in the Cam Ranh Bay area. However, by monitoring Japanese communications, the SIGINT unit was able to locate many individual ships, which were sunk by the Americans.

Having hit all available ships, Task Force 38 sailed to its next target, Japanese military units on Formosa. The SIGINT unit again provided warning and location information to the task force commanders.

SOURCE: An after-action history of U.S. Navy tactical SIGINT, *The Employment of Mobile Radio Intelligence Units by Commands Afloat during WWII*, declassified and published as Special Research History 289.

508 caption: a line of battle ships stretching toward the horizon.

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